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# “This Film Is Blessed by the Gods”: Talking with Mag Hsu, Director of *Dear Ex* (Netflix, 2018)

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Christopher Brown

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Hsu Chih-Yen and I immediately agreed that we wanted to represent a Taipei in July, especially the sun in Taipei. Under this July sun, everything is steaming, all the colours become vivid, and everyone feels sticky. This is just like the relationship between our inhabitants in Taipei – their passion can sometimes get clammy. For us, these various colours together create a beauty without any aesthetic. I found this beauty without an aesthetic very interesting. I’m confused by how sometimes, Taiwanese films depict Taiwan as somewhere that is not like the real Taiwan. Every time I travel abroad, I particularly enjoy walking in the messiest alleys, as I feel this is the most authentic representation of the real landscape. So the Taiwan I love most is those places, such as the betel nut stands, the messy streets with messy signs hanging from above.

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The runaway success of *Dear Ex* (2018) has established director Mag Hsu as a central figure in contemporary Taiwanese cinema. The drama is set in the aftermath of a gay man’s death, relating the conflict that develops between his wife, male partner, and young son. Addressing weighty issues with a light comic touch, *Dear Ex* has been a critical and commercial success, acquired for distribution through Netflix and ultimately taking

around 65 million NTD (New Taiwan Dollars) at the box office – over three times the initial forecast. The film won Best Narrative Film, Actor and Actress at the 2018 Taipei Film Awards, and was nominated for all the major awards at the Golden Horse Awards in the same year, with Hsieh Ying-Hsuen winning for her touching performance as the maddening widow Liu San-Lien.

The film's editor, Lei Chen-Ching, also took home a trophy, rewarding her efforts working alongside Hsu to completely restructure a first cut that was poorly received by test audiences. Amongst the numerous changes made in the re-edit was a shift in narrative focus onto the son, Cheng-Xi, from whose perspective the story unfolds. Sick of endlessly bickering with his mother, the boy decides to move in with his father's lover, thus exacerbating a legal dispute over who should benefit from the life insurance policy. The heart of the dilemma is captured by the film's Chinese title, which translates as *Who Fell in Love with Him First?* Liu San-Lien may be the wife recognized by law, but as the plot takes shape, it becomes clear that her husband's male partner Chieh has known him for longer, and may have a better moral claim to the insurance payout.

*Dear Ex* mounts a challenge to traditional notions of the heterosexual family, and directly raises questions relating to the legal entitlements of same-sex couples. In this sense, the film's popularity amongst audiences owes a great deal to its cultural resonance in the context of debates over the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan. The general release date of November 2018 was timely, meaning that *Dear Ex* appeared in the window between the court ruling that couples had the constitutional right to marry (May 2017) and the actual moment of legalization (May 2019). It is likely the film struck a chord with progressive-minded viewers who were, in the interim, caught up in a polarized and often fraught referendum campaign to prevent the recognition of same-sex marriage and restrict the teaching of LGBT issues. In this interview, Hsu suggests that the timing of the film's release was coincidental, but this was, nonetheless, one of many ways in which the project was "blessed by the gods."



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/cZuDMECORFE>

Hsu was the creative force behind the film, which she developed over several years and ultimately co-directed with newcomer Hsu Chih-Yen. In fact, *Dear Ex* also marks Mag Hsu's debut as a film director, as she is primarily known for her work in television. An acclaimed TV screenwriter, producer, and director, she has brought shows such as *In Time with You*, *Apple in Your Eye*, and *An Innocent Mistake* to audiences in Taiwan and beyond. Hsu is critical of television acting styles, however, and in *Dear Ex* worked hard to achieve believability in the performances, something she discusses in this interview. The results are impressive. Hsieh deftly makes a potentially unsympathetic character likable, evoking the vulnerability that underlies Liu San-Lien's hysterical outbursts, while Roy Chiu is revelatory as Chieh, inhabiting the role with disarming conviction and wit.

A more popular mode of filmmaking has tended to define Taiwanese cinema of the last decade. This broadly contrasts with many films produced during the New Taiwanese Cinema (c. 1982-1990) and its Second Wave (c. 1990-2008), which attracted critical acclaim and arthouse audiences abroad, but often had limited exposure to wider audiences, both within and outside Taiwan. *Dear Ex* is an LGBT film with broad appeal – political and accessible, entertaining and thought-provoking. As such, it's an especially accomplished example of the kind of filmmaking that has taken shape in Taiwan over the last decade.

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*Dear Ex* screened in various international film festivals, and is currently available to view to subscribers on Netflix. This interview took place in Mag Hsu's production office in Songshan District, Taipei, on 2 July 2019.

\* \* \*

*CB: I'd like to start by talking about your background.*

MH: I started my career in theatre. Hugh Lee, an esteemed playwright in Taiwan, mentored me for many years, so I got most of my writing experience from Mr. Lee. Thanks to him training me on the job, I became a screenwriter without any formal training. When I started to work in the TV industry, I luckily knew another important figure, Wang Xiao-Di, who recognised my talents in scriptwriting while we were having a meeting about a theatre performance. That was when I started my career as a screenwriter.

I wrote several popular TV series scripts, and as a screenwriter often had arguments with directors every time I felt they didn't do my scripts justice. Therefore, a senior manager in a TV station encouraged me to establish my own production company. With my own company I started to produce TV dramas. On the production of the first two series, we encountered the same problem – the directors I hired couldn't finish the job due to certain issues which forced me to step in as director and complete the unfinished parts.

*CB: So you actually took over the directing of episodes?*

MH: Since I was a director and a playwright in the theatre, I felt that in both art forms, the way that actors and directors approached concepts of performance was similar. The only difference was the medium of representation. So I didn't feel it was too difficult.



Mag Hsu (centre) on set, directing

*CB: Where did the idea for Dear Ex come from? What inspired you to start the project?*

MH: Screenwriter Lu Shih-Yuan and I discussed the subjects of about three stories, one of which was the origin of *Dear Ex*, based on my friend's true story. Clearly the script and story weren't one hundred percent identical. I was told that one day my friend, who is



married, found out her husband was having an affair with a guy. When my friend described this story to me, her state was almost like Liu San-Lien; very dramatic as she talked about what had happened. I was stunned by the image of this woman, and was intrigued at the same time, wanting to see the sorrow behind her façade. Out of the three options I had given her, Shih-Yuan was most interested in this story, and she then started to write a new script. Given that Shih-Yuan wasn't there when my friend discussed her story, and what she knew was only a starting point, I felt that she could be more objective in developing this story.

*CB: How was the film financed?*

MH: Being over fifty years old, I value my creative freedom and my autonomy, so I was afraid that the source of my budget would restrict my work. I was particularly cautious about mentoring a young director on this project. That's why at the beginning, I didn't find money externally. All the funding was from my friends, from their own pockets.

*CB: The film feels very contemporary and relevant. It was released around the same time as the debate over the change in marriage laws in Taiwan. Was this intentional – did you want the film to be part of that broader discussion?*

MH: It was a coincidence. Once we commenced pre-production, I started making adjustments to the script. I made some changes following people's feedback – what they liked, what left something to be desired – while it was left for a couple of years. After the production stage, we edited a very first version according the script, and it was awful. We invited five distributors to the screening. They all said "sorry" to our face after seeing the first edit. In the period before the planned release date, I made up my mind to re-edit the film, since I knew no one was satisfied with the results, and the whole project might end up botched; this period was around eight months. Surprisingly, this delay made our film combine with developments in the gay marriage debate. I sometimes feel that the gods arranged all this for us.

*CB: How do you see the film in relation to other LGBT films or TV? Do you consider Dear Ex to be an LGBT film?*

MH: In my TV work, I've always created important gay characters, such as good friends of the protagonists, or people who mean a lot to them. In almost every single TV series I have written, you will see this kind of character. With this film, on the contrary, I'd rather people not only look at the issue of gender, but at reconciliation, through which everyone can swap positions and try to understand the thoughts of others. When I felt that the new version was really done, and when Warner Brothers saw it and decided to distribute it, their marketing team told us, "This is not only an LGBT film." I was delighted with this, and it led me to give them the distribution rights. I truly believe that *Dear Ex* is not only an LGBT film; it involves more, all kinds of communities, a range of perspectives. This is why I feel that this film doesn't need to be labeled an LGBT film.

*CB: Were you ever worried about setting up Chieh and Liu San-Lien's viewpoints as equally valid? I'm just thinking that a gay audience might say: well, he's justified, whereas she's evidently prejudiced. Were you ever worried about this when you were making the film?*

MH: I actually felt that gay audiences are more compassionate, so any concern that gay audiences would dislike Liu San-Lien didn't cross my mind. They'd say, "Ah yes, this kind of middle-aged woman does exist." What I was worried about were those narrow-minded people, who have a very restricted and prejudiced perspective on love. They wouldn't shift their ingrained ideas one bit after walking into the cinema and watching this film.

*CB: Why did you choose to tell the story from the boy's perspective?*

MH: This is actually an element we discovered later. The first failed version of the film I mentioned earlier didn't have a narrator. The problem with that version was that it had three points of view imposed on the viewers simultaneously, with nobody to lead us into the story. After I identified this problem, I wanted to find a main narrator for the story, and I instinctively thought of Cheng-Xi. I hoped the audience would be led by this pure point of view, by this slightly annoying but adorable and genuine boy, to explore this story.



Liu San-Lien (Hsieh Ying-Hsuen, left) clashes with Chieh, her husband's lover

*CB: Liu San-Lien is annoying, controlling, and hysterical, but at the same time the audience loves this and they want her to succeed. How did you achieve that? How did you make a potentially unlikable character so engaging?*

MH: In fact, our first mishandled, traumatising version of the film was screened not only to distributors, but to twenty viewers. After the screening, they all reached one conclusion: Liu San-Lien was like their mother, but she was really annoying. I felt this was actually a very serious problem – everyone felt the character was authentic, but truly hated her too. This was not my intention at all. What I'd been hoping was that the audience would see her pain. This screening signalled to me that there was some problem with the editing, which resulted in this kind of perception. In the end, it was her son who saved her, and made her likable. The son's narration directly points out the ways in which Liu San-Lien is a nuisance; it puts the audience in the same boat, looking at this tiger mother and how scary she is! This way, we made Liu San-Lien a very likable character for everyone.

*CB: How much of the final film is different from the script in terms of the storytelling? Is it completely different?*

MH: The structure is totally changed. We also cut lots of scenes. But the main thing was the change to the structure, the change of the narrator.

*CB: There are two of you credited as directors. How did Hsu Chih-Yen come to be involved in the project?*

MH: Although I mentioned that I wasn't worried about the performances, I was, however, really concerned that I didn't have enough understanding of a film's visuals. As a result, I wanted to find another director. I hoped that first and foremost, this director would help me look after the visuals, and secondly, that he or she would be a younger director. By doing this, I was hoping that I could cultivate and nourish young talent, and give a young person opportunities through which they would be seen, and would grow. This was my premise when I looked for a collaborator.

*CB: You mentioned your background in theatre. A lot of the film's scenes take place in a theatre – was it your own experience that led you to do that? Or was that in the script initially?*

MH: As Shi-Yuan wrote it, Chieh was a theatre director, and in the script he keeps rehearsing a play. When I made my adjustments, I wanted him to gradually put a play together and ultimately perform it, whereas in the script he was stuck in endless rehearsals. The play *Happy Holiday* was actually my own theatre piece as a writer-director. I integrated the play into my film, and made it a real performance. My mentor, Hugo Lee, told me that his passion for the theatre meant that he would always craft the best performance, would do it justice, even if there was only one audience member left in the auditorium. This motto has stayed in my mind ever since. I transformed this sentiment into Chieh's perseverance in love and theatre. He's like a guy who sees his work falling apart, on the verge of collapse, but chooses to hold onto it until the last minute. So I borrowed what my mentor said, and put it into my script.

*CB: How did you cast the actors? Did you have them in mind already? Did you do auditions?*

MH: I had Hsieh Ying-Hsuen in mind as Liu San-Lien from the very beginning, because



I've been watching her theatre performances for a long time, and I'm a fan. I had the idea of working with her after I saw her shows, if I could find the opportunity. Also, in terms of the script, I could see the concern that the character of Liu San-Lien might be disliked by the audience. How could we walk that fine line between hatred and empathy? I felt that Ying-Shuan and I had a nice spark.

As for Roy Chiu, I am good friends with his agent, and I promised her I would cast him in the lead role. I actually had zero curiosity about him as an actor. I wasn't too keen on working with male actors who are too pretty and handsome – I somehow lacked a desire to work with them. So it was purely to keep my word. And it was when I started to work with Roy, such as in rehearsals before the shoot, doing things like script read-throughs, that I discovered some of his problems as an actor. He had some habits that were established in his TV work. For instance, he was too self-conscious of the camera, and he was often not present, as if he was watching his performance somewhere else. Whether on *Dear Ex* or any of my other projects, I don't like it when actors aren't in character.

Before the shoot, the relationship between Roy and myself had badly deteriorated. I was so harsh with him, constantly, and I felt that he was withholding his anger. On the evening of the first day of filming, I asked him to meet me in the production office. We started the conversation with alcohol. I asked him, "What struggles have you been through? What in your previous TV experience gave you these habits? They show that you are scared of getting hurt." Roy is very clever, so he understood straightaway that I could see his fear, or loneliness, after he heard what I said. Working in a TV production environment entails speed, so all actors have to know immediately where the camera is, what reaction they should give, what kind of feedback in terms of the performance is good for the camera. Like – you see the light there, and in your mind, you consider what you should do to make the lighting work better. None of this is in the service of the actor. Speed and efficiency are what people are after.

That night, at that moment, Roy started to discuss his acting habits, and I think this is how I won his heart. He became willing to share the bad experiences he'd had when he was a novice actor in TV – how he was told off by DPs, how he was smeared by directors, or even blamed by other actors who were paired with him to perform scenes, and so on. Then I explained the shortcomings of drawing on these acting habits. I told him, "Don't worry. Tomorrow is the first day, and all I want from you is do one thing well: be my actor." Throughout the whole shoot, I used methods, every day, to ensure that he would forget about the camera position, forget about acting for the lights, forget about helping other actors he was working with, forget about those inflexible skills promoted by so-called good actors.



Roy Chiu and Hsieh Ying-Hsuen

*CB: The visuals are very colourful – lots of bright, bold colours in the production design, lighting, and costumes. It's quite different to how Taipei is often presented on film, a bit grey and muted. I was wondering why you chose to do this?*

MH: This is rather interesting. Hsu Chih-Yen and I immediately agreed that we wanted to represent a Taipei in July, especially the sun in Taipei. Under this July sun, everything is steaming, all the colours become vivid, and everyone feels sticky. This is just like the relationship between our inhabitants in Taipei – their passion can sometimes get clammy. For us, these various colours together create a beauty without any aesthetic. I found this beauty without an aesthetic very interesting. I'm confused by how sometimes, Taiwanese films depict Taiwan as somewhere that is not like the real Taiwan. Every time I travel abroad, I particularly enjoy walking in the messiest alleys, as I feel this is the most authentic representation of the real landscape. So the Taiwan I love most is those places, such as the betel nut stands, the messy streets with messy signs hanging from above. I feel this is why, when we stroll in the dirtiest streets in foreign countries, we say, "Oh, this is Greece, this is Venice, etc." I would ask, "Why do we have to show Taipei 101 when we film Taiwan, or some nicely lit bridges?" We actually have many other places that are genuinely Taiwanese.

*CB: Can I ask why you included the animations?*

MH: The character of Cheng-Xi is seeing a consultant, and drawings are used as a form of treatment by children's counsellors. When I made up my mind to use Cheng-Xi as the narrator, I felt that I needed to use the illustrations to fulfil something in my new edit, to compensate for what was inadequate. Actually, the drawings also helped to compensate for something else – this was our DP's first feature as well, so in several places we had some small mistakes in the cinematography. Luckily, these drawings not only served the character, but made up for a few mistakes visually.

*CB: The film has been very successful amongst audiences, and I was wondering whether you expected this kind of reaction, or were surprised by this.*

MH: When we first estimated our box office, all the more experienced filmmakers told us that 5 million NTD would be the best we could get. For LGBT films, generally speaking in Taiwan, the box office ceiling is about 5 million NTD. It was only Warner Brothers who told us it was not only an LGBT film, and they forecast that our box office would be 20 million NTD. But soon after they gave this estimated figure, we were nominated at the Taipei Film Festival, and afterwards won five big awards. Warner Brothers changed their mind, feeling that this could add another 10 million, so in total that was 30 million NTD. However, when the Golden Horse Awards announced their nominations, we got eight! That was totally unexpected. To be honest, my only hope was that *Dear Ex* could break even, since all my friends had invested their own money in it. I hoped that they wouldn't lose their savings. I could never have imagined getting recognition at the Taipei Film Festival nor the nominations at the Golden Horse Awards. With the endorsement of Golden Horse, Warner Brothers felt that they could add another 10 million. I have to say, I've been feeling that this film is blessed by the gods. In the end, our box office was 65 million, beyond Warner Brothers' expectations, a really happy ending for everyone.



The warring family make their way to the theatre

*CB: I'm curious, given the film's subject matter and current issues like the sex education debate, have you had anyone criticize the film?*

MH: Back in Taiwan, when we had just released the film in cinemas, there was one screening in which our staff hid in the auditorium. They saw one couple stand up and say "What a bad film!" ten minutes after it started. Then they walked out. Certainly, we didn't make it clear, in any promotional documents, that it was an LGBT film. That's why we had some small-minded audiences going into the cinema, who could only understand love from a narrow-minded perspective. So one type of reaction we got is that they walked out after they realised *Dear Ex* was a story about gay people. I think that was

probably the most malign criticism. But we've also received far more positive feedback, saying that people changed their old, narrow-minded point of view; the film loosened and shifted their ingrained thoughts.

But there is another cruel fact. We discussed this with my colleagues in a feedback meeting after we wrapped up all the work on *Dear Ex*. When we did the promotion and marketing, we didn't make issues about LGBT communities our main message; as I explained earlier, Warner Brothers didn't think *Dear Ex* was just a gay film. We hoped that more people would come to watch our film, to be touched by our story. However, with the gay marriage march and protest and related events unfolding, we did make two promotional videos for LGBT communities. One of them had more of a comedy style, and one was very touching. The touching one went viral and was shared by hundreds of thousands; we were really surprised by the impact. We uploaded it the night before the march. It reached many people, and was shared amongst mothers of gay people, or families with gay children. They felt proud of their strength.

But strangely, after these two promotional videos were put online, our box office stopped growing. To tell the truth, before uploading this, we had won three awards at Golden Horse, and Warner Brothers had adjusted their prediction, thinking that we might be able to go over 80 million. So this is something I couldn't figure out, and still wonder about. It's a very interesting phenomenon. I tried to analyse this, searching using keywords. I found out that many gay people didn't go to the cinema to watch *Dear Ex*. Instead they discovered this film on Netflix. So I guess, maybe, the reason the box office growth was curbed was actually the LGBT communities themselves. But why is that? I have no clue, and am trying to find an answer. I wonder if there are many LGBT people who prefer to be hidden. Even though people fought bravely for their rights, do they still feel the need to stay at home and watch this film on Netflix – even in this modern era, in this civilised society, with open-minded attitudes? Of course this is my own assumption, without any evidence. Though I do feel that these two phenomena are linked.

*CB: How did Netflix come to distribute the project?*

MH: Entering the Taipei Film Festival, we had several screenings, in which lots of programmers, coming from all over the place, sat with us. And one of the most important of those programmers was Netflix. Luckily, at that specific screening, the reaction from the audience was thrilling, which definitely affected the people from Netflix. You see, sometimes the audience sitting around you is very important for your viewing experience. Many industry figures were there, people who love Taiwanese film with all their heart. That's why we had a very good audience reaction in that screening. I remember that my friend, who brought Netflix along, came to sit next to me and said: "I feel this is blessed by the gods; the people from Netflix love your film." It wasn't only because of the film itself. I gather the overall reaction from the audience made our film even more appealing.

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## *Acknowledgments*

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